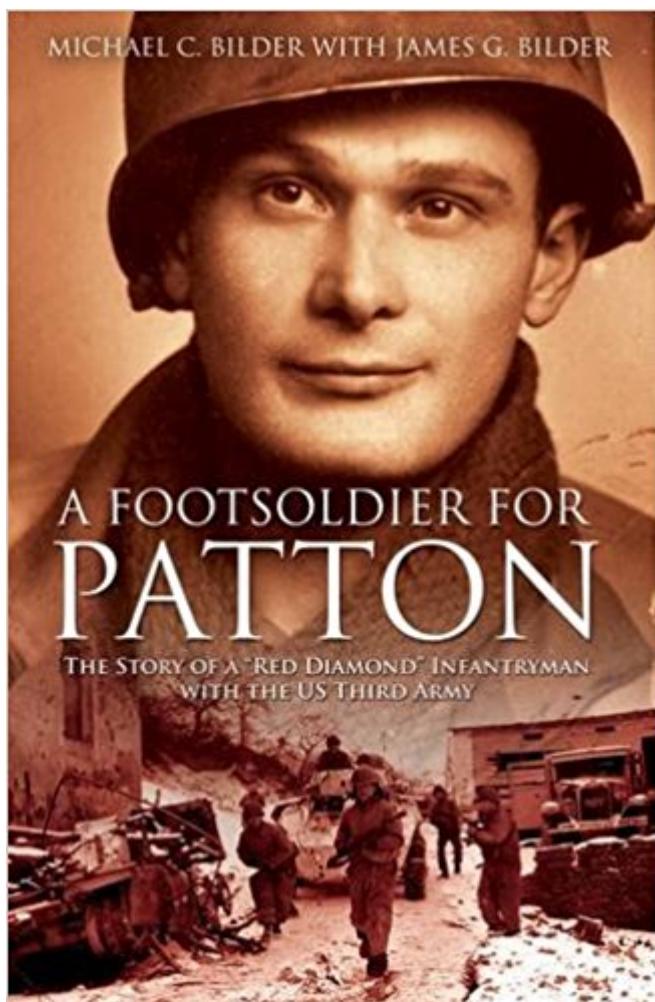


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A Foot Soldier For Patton: The Story Of A "Red Diamond" Infantryman With The US Third Army



Synopsis

A brutally honest depiction of day-to-day combat in World War II . . . A rarely frank account of the U.S. infantry experience in northern Europe, *A Foot Soldier for Patton* takes the reader from the beaches of Normandy through the giddy drive across France, to the brutal battles on the Westwall, in the Ardennes, and finally to the conquest of Germany itself. Patton's army is best known for dashing armored attacks, its commander combining the firepower of tanks with their historic lineage as cavalry. But when the Germans stood firm the greatest fighting was done by Patton's long undersung infantry—the foot sloggers who were called upon to reduce enemy strong points, and who took the brunt of German counterattacks. Michael Bilder, a member of the 5th Infantry (the Red Diamond division), played a unique role in the Third Army's onslaught. A rifleman foremost, he was also a German-speaker, called upon for interrogations and special duties. Also a combat lifeguard, he played a key role in successive river crossings. An astute observer, he relates dozens of fascinating insights into the campaign, from dealing with German snipers to intoxicated Frenchwomen, as well as relaying the often morbid humor of combat. Laughter, for example, erupts among Bilder's unit when a hated Graves Registration officer, known for robbing the pockets of the dead, gets his hand blown off by a German booby trap. When the 5th Infantry comes up against the fortress of Metz, the battle is detailed in all its horror, as is the sudden drive into the flank of the Bulge, where the Americans face their first winter battle against enemy veterans of Russia. Incidents common to the ordinary GI, but which seldom see the light of day in histories, are routinely related in this book, enriching the reader's sense of the true reality of World War II combat.

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Customer Reviews

I had intended to keep my reading on this topic to paperbacks but this hardcover came to me as a gift (following my hints) and I'm very pleased that it did! Michael Bilder was drafted into the army over a year before Pearl Harbor, so by the time he enters Normandy in early July 1944 he has had quite a bit of training. He served with the 5th Infantry Division, mostly with the 2nd Infantry Regt's 2nd battalion. His service included 18 months in Iceland, followed by a year in the UK, mostly in Northern Ireland. He was no fan of the army but he was athletic and intelligent and seemed to be a natural soldier - though not a saintly one. He is lucky to avoid severe punishment for various misdemeanors, mainly run-ins with authority. This is all pretty interesting by itself, then on page 88 he lands in Normandy and things click up several gears again. Bilder very aptly describes himself as a footsoldier in his title. As an infantryman in the hedgerows he does a lot of fighting. He learns very quickly that the Germans are very good soldiers and he describes the quick counter-attacks and some very cunning ambushes. He also calls them dirty fighters due to their penchant for booby-trapping everything and he describes several incidents where these cause havoc. There is quite a bit on Normandy but his worst experiences were at Metz, attacking the forts. There is also significant action in the drive across Germany and Bilder is in the midst of all of it. Because Bilder survives 10 months of battle he sees many examples of everything and is therefore able to provide a clearer picture of the frequency of particular occurrences. I'm thinking particularly here of the shooting of prisoners. It was rife, almost routine at times.

4 1/2 stars. Bilder runs the gamut of combat experiences starting with the bitter fighting across France all the way to Czechoslovakia. Michael Bilder served in 5th Infantry Div., 2d Rgt. 2d Battalion and spends a lengthy interval on Iceland, then in the UK and enters combat at Normandy in July 1944 (a little over a quarter into the book). His pre-combat chapters tend to drag and you get the sense that Bilder definitely has a high opinion of himself but he is very intelligent and recites interesting anecdotes. His narrative really picks up once he crosses the channel to aid in the fight against Nazi Germany, too. His combat experience is quite nuanced for several reasons. First, Bilder speaks German and is often called upon as interpreter for officers and finds himself in a series of differing roles varying from interrogating POWs to essentially pimping for a junior officer around the Battle of the Bulge. This also allows him to regale us with stories of mingling with civilians, a facet of his account that makes it stand out amongst others. Bilder was also a messenger for the

American Red Cross, a role requiring him to deliver messages throughout differing units and, for logistical reasons, he often became an acting member of a given unit until he could reasonably return to his own. This meant that he'd face front line combat with a company, even when his company was in reserve. He ultimately concludes that this mostly worked out in his favor because he managed to miss the more costly engagements his own company fought in as a result. But this didn't mean Bilder was always out of the fight. On the contrary, he is often in the thick of battle and is quite thorough about his personal combat experience.

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